

Rating the Packers: Week 8 at Vikings

Aaron Rodgers leaves his mark on the Metrodome

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
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Green Bay - The Metrodome was as alive as only the Metrodome can be for a Green Bay-Minnesota football game after Cordarrelle Patterson returned the opening kickoff for an NFL-record 109 yards.

All it really did was stoke the Packers' intensity, which burned hot Sunday night from start to finish.

By the end, Aaron Rodgers, Jordy Nelson, Eddie Lacy and James Starks, and a gang-tackling defense had sucked so much energy from the crowd that Patterson's return was all but forgotten.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 44-31 victory over the Vikings, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4)

A most encouraging development from the Packers' point of view was the more substantial blocking of TE Andrew Quarless. After getting beat inside by SLB Chad Greenway on the second play, Quarless didn't have another "bad" run in a season-high 52 snaps. When the Vikings crashed their defensive ends inside, the Packers entrusted Quarless with a one-on-one down block on the end so RT Don Barclay could pull outside and lead on the tosses. Quarless executed well against LE Brian Robison three or four times, and in another situation he locked on to Greenway and ran his feet on contact. It was the most physical that Quarless has played since his terrible knee injury two years ago. He looked fluid catching the ball in the flat, too. On the other hand, Brandon Bostick (26) had 2½ "bad" runs. He lined up too wide on third and 1 and failed to cut off Jared Allen, managed to slip in space to give Greenway a free shot at Lacy, and missed a back-side cut against Robison. Bostick wasn't intimidated; he shoved Allen a few times. He just needs a ton of work. Still, the coaches obviously feel he's further along than rookie Jake Stoneburner. Nelson was marvelous, making five of his seven receptions for first downs on third and fourth downs. Minus Randall Cobb, James Jones and Jermichael Finley, Nelson played inside (16 of 68 snaps) probably more than he has all season. It was from there that he caught TD passes of 11 and 76 yards. He uses his leverage to run cornerbacks off and then his big body and their momentum to separate. Jarrett Boykin (66) continued to impress, making difficult catches of three low balls and having the presence of mind to jump back to his feet and turn a 13-yard completion into 17 on third and 16. A free agent, he outperformed the high draft choices trying to cover him. The 185-pound Myles White (58) must add bulk and strength by 2014. He didn't have the power to sustain run blocks and took a beating after a few catches. But he does possess instant acceleration, which CB Chris Cook discovered on a 15-yard hitch.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

The only man without a pressure or "bad" run was T.J. Lang. While Evan Dietrich-Smith was having his poorest game in a month and Josh Sitton gave up 1½ pressures and 1½ "bad" runs, Lang controlled DTs Kevin Williams (40), Letroy Guion (40), rookie Sharrif Floyd (35) and Fred Evans (26). Lang is taking good sets, playing with balance and jamming rushers before they can get to his body. On combination run blocks, he has moved easily to the second level. Sitton was very good at the point of attack but not as good making cut-off blocks. Dietrich-Smith got blown up several times in the running game by cocked nose tackles to the play side. Not only did he yield too much penetration, he was knocked down too much by Williams and Evans. When his footwork is off, he can get too high and gets overpowered. On the outside, David Bakhtiari was opposite the hard-charging Allen on most of his 61 snaps and held him to no tackles and one-half pressure. His steely focus and determination were evident in the cauldron of noise. In fact, the rookie probably had more problems with talented backup Everson Griffen, who pushed him back on two "bad" runs in the late going. Barclay pulled front-side four times and proved he could pick up moving targets in space. Of Barclay's 4½ pressures, 2½ were against Griffen and two against Robison. Foes are pushing him back on bull rushes before frequently slipping off to the outside. Barclay's ability to recover in a hurry keeps him viable.

QUARTERBACKS (5)

Rodgers drained the Vikings, who played at fever pitch in the early going. His production on third and fourth down (15 of 20) was spectacular. Time after time the fans would rev up, and Rodgers then would break their hearts by throwing a dart to Nelson or run for one of his three first downs. Coordinator Alan Williams didn't dare blitz (11.1%) much. On Williams' first pressure of the game, Rodgers and Nelson read the same five-man zone blitz in the second quarter and his pass whizzed past Greenway's tight coverage for a 76-yard TD. Williams employed a match coverage scheme underneath his two-safety shell. Of Rodgers' five incompletions, two were thrown away, one and possibly two were dropped, and the other was off-target. That 11-yard TD pass to Nelson on third down was a bull's-eye into the narrowest of windows. Chicago's Brian Urlacher picked off or thwarted Rodgers in the past on similar pressure/route combinations. Rodgers did hold the ball 5.6 seconds for one of the two sacks. Given the level of noise and supporting cast, he was sensational.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

John Kuhn played 29 of the 76 snaps, 14 more than in any other game. Just three came as a one-back in hurry-up. Mike McCarthy called up some of his traditional two-back sets and Kuhn responded by not having a clean miss or getting overpowered as a blocker. On fourth and 1, McCarthy pulled out a flat pass to Kuhn that opponents haven't seen in a while and on fourth and 1 it worked for 7. Lacy (62) handled the lion's share of the work although Starks returned from a month-long knee injury to play an entire nine-snap series and two more snaps on another drive. Lacy carried 29 times, took some hellacious hits and gained 94 yards. Hard to say how long he'll last absorbing that kind of punishment. Lacy keeps making subtle cuts in traffic. He's not impatient at all to the hole. He reads and dips, then gets north and south and most of the time finishes forward. Starks was on fire. When the Vikings dropped an extra defender in the box based on Rodgers' cadence, Starks jammed it back at them for a 25-yard TD by seeing the inside opening, jetting past a pair of tacklers and making the safety (Andrew Sendejo) miss at the 14.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

The defense was on the field for only 47 snaps, and just 14 came in the 3-4 base. Ryan Pickett was outstanding in his 16-play cameo. When A.J. Hawk was able to shoot a gap on the Vikings' opening possession, it was because Pickett prevented either of two linemen from getting off him onto Hawk. Pickett played through RG Brandon Fusco to stop Peterson for no gain and kept the physical pressure on undersized C John Sullivan. B.J. Raji (23) also tackled Peterson for no gain when LG Charlie Johnson couldn't budge him. Johnny Jolly (11) barely broke a sweat. The playing-time and production leader was Mike Daniels (30), whose 3½ pressures included sacks against Sullivan and Johnson. Daniels is playing hungry. He's short and strong, is using his hands better to disengage from blocks and finishes fast to the quarterback. When the Vikings' front tired late, Daniels hunkered down low and flushed Christian Ponder with a bull rush that drove back a Sullivan-Johnson double team. Daniels and Datone Jones (21), the No. 1 set of interior rushers in sub, lost their lane responsibility late and the result was Ponder's 19-yard TD run up the middle. Jones took a foolish 15-yard penalty for hitting RT Phil Loadholt after the whistle and didn't have a pressure. He charges off the ball well but gets knocked off track too easily, appears somewhat common trying to redirect and ends up on the ground too much.

LINEBACKERS (3 ½)

Hawk, who played all 47 snaps, wasn't the first player to be exposed by Peterson. On Peterson's long gain of 17 yards, Hawk peeked inside, got out of his gap and then missed the tackle as he roared into the secondary. When the Vikings gambled running Peterson from the 8 with 10 seconds left in the first half, this is when the top middle linebackers bow up and stop him. Hawk grabbed on at the 4 and then was dragged across the goal line. Two of his team-leading 11 blitzes resulted in pressures. Jamari Lattimore (28) was a little out of control early before getting used to the whirlwind that is Peterson. He had three pressures in six blitzes, beating Fusco for a sack in 3.6 seconds and Toby Gerhart for a flush with a violent flash of explosiveness that nearly floored the stocky running back. Mike Neal (43) had 1½ pressures but didn't have any against Loadholt, who had really been struggling against better rushers. That was disappointing, as was his missed tackle in space on TE Kyle Rudolph's 14-yard reception. ROLB Nate Palmer got the starting nod over Andy Mulumba, and when Mulumba sat out the second half with a leg injury Palmer's snap edge was 38-14. Mulumba has the physical presence but is playing with more hesitation than Palmer.

SECONDARY (3 ½)

In one of his more forgettable appearances, Morgan Burnett missed four tackles. He looked down a few times and lost vision to the ball carrier. Peterson also made Chris Banjo, Sam Shields and M.D. Jennings all miss once. With all hands at last healthy, eight DBs played from scrimmage as the Packers began evaluating who should play and when. The Packers held the Browns and Vikings without a gain of 20 yards or more. That hasn't happened back-to-back in Green Bay from 1995 to the present. Greg Jennings had one catch, but that was due as much to Ponder's inability to execute a legitimate progression than great coverage. Tramon Williams, Burnett and Shields played all 47 snaps. Then it was Jennings (37), Casey Hayward (22), Micah Hyde (19), Davon House (11) and Banjo (10). The 26-yard pass-interference foul on Williams was questionable; the 44-yarder was well-deserved. Hayward got mauled once or twice against the run and didn't show any pop in a secondary-high four pressures. Dom Capers blitzed 46.9%, rotated a safety in the box against Peterson and changed up zone coverage. Rudolph took a jump ball away from M.D. Jennings for 17 on third and 10.

KICKERS (3 ½)

Mason Crosby kept hitting straight kicks on field goals, connecting three times from the left hash mark (30, 20, 45). When Patterson brought back Tim Masthay's 74-yard, 4.06-second kickoff, coordinator Shawn Slocum summoned Crosby and his greater repertoire of kickoffs in an effort to foil him. Crosby fared well, averaging 72 and 3.87 on his seven boots that he tried to hit high and deep. Masthay never had to punt.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Hyde's decision to field Jeff Locke's 53-yard punt at the 7 (4.82 hang time) was regarded as a good decision by Slocum; one reason the Packers abhor starting inside the 5 is the possibility of a safety if holding occurs in the end zone. Picking up blocks by Jarrett Bush, Jerron McMillian, Banjo, Bostick and Jennings, the nery Hyde took it straight up the gut for a 93-yard TD. He also had a 16-yard return brought back by Stoneburner's illegal-block penalty and let a punt roll 10 yards that he should have run up and caught. Patterson's TD is contained at the 25 if Hyde makes the rather routine tackle. On Patterson's 51-yard return, Hyde and House played it poorly. Hyde replaced Johnathan Franklin on KO returns at halftime after the UCLA rookie was awful. There was no reason for him to return a 73-yard boot with 4.03 hang time, and he wasn't the least bit decisive on an off-again, on-again return to close the half. LB Sam Barrington stood out with his hard-nosed approach. Mulumba also missed two tackles.

OVERALL (4)

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